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# THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

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## A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF JESUS. I

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Conducted by  
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### Introduction

Mankind's chief problem is how to live. To be right and to do right is our continual obligation and quest. In concrete matters of everyday living we must be always considering how we should feel, think, choose, and act. Our individual welfare and the social welfare are equally involved in these decisions. Right conduct and character are the essentials of goodness, of happiness, and of human progress. All normal persons are eager and sincere in their purpose and effort to be and to do right. The ideals, standards, principles, and precepts of living are the strongest factors in our civilization.

Jesus set forth and urged an ideal of life. He was a teacher of righteousness. The Kingdom of God which he proclaimed as at hand was to be a reign of righteousness. Admission to it was only for the righteous (Matt. 5:20; 7:21-27). Jesus' ethical ideal was the highest that had been advanced, his moral demands of men were the most strenuous. He gave a new interpretation and power to the best ethical insight and teaching of the Old Testament and of the Judaism of his own day. He taught with freshness, originality, and authority concerning human conduct and character; he gave a new impulse to the moral consciousness, aspiration, and effort of men. Not only the Jews, but later also the people of the Mediterranean world as a whole, found truth, value, and power in his teaching. The attitude which Jesus assumed toward life has made him the most renowned person in history. To him as to no other have divinity and absoluteness been ascribed. The practical helpfulness of his message and example have been proved in nearly nineteen hundred years of human experience. Jesus has become the ethical ideal and his teaching has functioned as the ethical norm in European civilization.

To know the ethical teaching of Jesus is therefore of supreme interest and importance. In one sense, this subject of study is not a new one—Christians from the first generation to the present have learned and applied the teaching

and example of Jesus to their daily living. The principles and precepts of righteousness set forth by him are commonplaces in our church teaching and in our common consciousness. One might perhaps suppose that the New Testament ethics was so ingrained in the Western mind that it would operate and perpetuate itself automatically. In another sense, our study of the ethical teachings of Jesus is quite new—because of the historical and scientific points of view, processes of interpretation, criteria of evaluation, and methods of use which we now apply to them.

We now distinguish sharply between the historical and the homiletical interpretation of Jesus' teaching. The historical interpretation aims to discover just what Jesus during his public ministry thought and said, why he thought and said these things, and how his words were understood by those to whom he spoke them. The homiletical interpretation, on the other hand, makes the teaching of Jesus serve our present moral-religious need; its problem is not what this teaching meant in the first century, but what it can usefully be made to mean for the twentieth century. Since Jesus is our ethical ideal and his teaching is our ethical norm, both must be made in some way to yield a present-day ethics. Therefore Jesus' example is often construed unhistorically, and his teaching is often given a content or a meaning or a color or a perspective or an application which did not originally belong to it. Shall we approve this pragmatizing of Jesus and his words, this modern "universal" or "allegorical" interpretation of Scripture? In any case, historical interpretation seeks to know Jesus as he actually was, and to understand his teaching according to his own thought and meaning, with full knowledge of the environment to which it originally belonged. This kind of study is now the pursuit of New Testament scholars, and needs to be widely popularized.

Also, we are now instructed by science to distinguish between ethics and religion. The term "religion" has a complex connotation. The historical religions have generally been ethical; the Christian religion has been highly ethical. Religion has several factors: mystical experience, theological doctrine, religious ritual, ecclesiastical organization, and moral teaching. Of these several elements, ethics is essential. Even the Greek philosophers did not detach religion from their scientific ethics. The ancient and the modern worlds alike identify religion and ethics, to the extent that ethics is viewed religiously and religion is viewed ethically. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament differentiates them. Jesus and Paul represent Judaism in treating all the problems of living as religious problems. Righteousness, their comprehensive ethical term, means to them obedience to the revealed will of God. And present-day Christianity continues to think ethics and religion together. The scientific differentiation of them has not yet established itself in the popular mind. However, this differentiation is being forced upon us by the American separation of church and state, which requires that public education shall be ethical but not religious (as the term is commonly used). And the science of ethics claims freedom from religious presuppositions, doctrines, and control.

The time therefore seems to have arrived for a study of the ethical teaching of Jesus in distinction from his other religious teaching, especially his doctrinal teaching. To be sure, this distinction is to be made with difficulty, as he did not make it. But we can direct our attention in the Gospels to those passages which particularly deal with conduct and character, to Jesus' exposition of righteousness. We can study his teachings concerning love, forgiveness, helpfulness, chastity, truthfulness, leaving to another course the study of his teachings concerning God, the Messiah, the resurrection, the judgment, and the theological significance of his death. It is notable that the Sermon on the Mount (Matt., chaps. 5-7) is an epitome of Jesus' ethical teaching; it sets forth concisely the principles of right living. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount was compiled from the memorabilia of Jesus by the primitive Christians precisely for the purpose of furnishing to the rising church a manual of Christian conduct. For this reason a study of the ethical teaching of Jesus will consist, in the first place, of a study of the teachings in Matt., chaps. 5-7, with their Lukan parallels; in the second place, of those further teachings in the First and Third Gospels which enlarge upon and supplement the Sermon teachings. The simplest and best method is to study the teaching of Jesus as it is presented in the Gospel of Matthew, beginning with chap. 5 and continuing to the end of chap. 25. Comparison may be made between the parallel accounts of the first three Gospels (a Harmony of the Gospels will be found useful for this purpose). Mark has very little teaching that is not contained in Matthew. Luke has a considerable body of ethical teaching not contained in Matthew, which should also be studied. The Gospel of John reports little of the ethical teaching of Jesus; its aim is to interpret the person and work of Christ.

This reading course on *The Ethical Teaching of Jesus* is designed to elucidate the records, contents, genetic relations, and practical values of Christian ethics at its initial stage. Part I will deal with "Our Accounts of the Ethical Teaching of Jesus," showing how Jesus' sayings were preserved, used, adapted, and collected into our New Testament Gospels. Part II will interpret "Jesus' Ethical Principles," as given in the great discourse sections of the Gospel of Matthew, with parallel and additional passages in Mark and Luke. Part III will be a study of "The Relation of Jesus' Ethical Teaching to the Old Testament and to Judaism," the aim being to see how Jesus' ethical message stood related to that contained in the writings of the Law and the Prophets and in the best Jewish teaching of his own day. Part IV will consider "The Present-Day Value and Use of Jesus' Ethical Teaching." To discover how the first-century teaching can serve the ethical needs of the twentieth century is a practical achievement of great importance. We, too, have the great problems of life to solve, and ours are not essentially different from theirs. *Mutatis mutandis*, of course; but man is man, and life is life, whether oriental and ancient or occidental and modern. What the Mediterranean world once found supremely true and helpful continues still to be the highest ethical ideal and message of humanity.

**Books Required in This Course**

Holdsworth, <i>Gospel Origins</i> .	Alexander, <i>Christianity and Ethics</i> .
King, <i>The Ethics of Jesus</i> .	Clarke, <i>The Ideal of Jesus</i> .
Plummer, <i>Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew</i> .	Peabody, <i>The Christian Life in the Modern World</i> .
Stalker, <i>The Ethics of Jesus</i> .	Rauschenbusch, <i>Christianizing the Social Order</i> .
Mitchell, <i>The Ethics of the Old Testament</i> .	
Hughes, <i>The Ethics of Jewish Apocryphal Literature</i> .	

**Part I. Our Accounts of the Ethical Teaching of Jesus**

On this topic the books to be read are: Holdsworth, *Gospel Origins*; King, *The Ethics of Jesus*.

Many excellent books have recently been published concerning the authorship, dates, sources, and relations of the Synoptic Gospels. Professor Holdsworth's small book endeavors to summarize this scholarly opinion and to reach an independent judgment on the many aspects of this problem. His title, *Gospel Origins*, must be understood to mean The Origin of the Synoptic Gospels. A comparison of Matthew, Mark, and Luke shows a remarkable series of similarities and differences in their accounts of Jesus; they tell a common story in a three-fold form. The history of the Gospel-making process is one of the most intricate, important, and engaging studies in the whole field of historical investigation. Our knowledge of Jesus' life, personality, and message is conditioned upon the trustworthiness of our Gospel records of him. Specifically for our present purpose, we cannot know what the ethical teaching of Jesus was unless the Synoptic Gospels can be depended upon for this information.

The Gospels purport to give us a trustworthy account of Jesus, including his ethical teaching. From the first century until the present, the Christian church has regarded and used the synoptic teaching as the genuine teaching of Jesus. Holdsworth is right in assuming the general historicity of the teaching attributed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke to Jesus; the burden of proof against this lies with those few scholars who question or doubt it. To be sure, the Gospels do not contain a first-hand, complete, and *ipsissima verba* account of Jesus' teaching: they were not written by Jesus himself, they report but a fraction of all the teaching he gave, and their accounts are in Greek instead of in the original Aramaic. Besides, the primitive Christians used Jesus' teaching for the gentile mission, and for practical purposes of Christian instruction, in which process the message was variously repeated, selected, adapted, rearranged, and supplemented. The total effect, however, of this pragmatization of Jesus' teaching was not such as to obscure his actual message. The Synoptic Gospels, historically interpreted, do indeed make known to us the ethical teaching of Jesus. They agree, not only fundamentally, but in extensive detail, as to the content and the expression of his message. The differences in parallel accounts of the teaching, and the

passages peculiar to each Gospel, do not in essential respects present to us conflicting accounts of what Jesus thought and taught.

This being the case, it is a minor matter what particular theory of the synoptic problem one adopts. The several important theories now advocated by New Testament scholars are well presented by Holdsworth, and one may profitably compare them. The two-document hypothesis, which in various forms constitutes the prevailing opinion among German and English scholars, he gives extended exposition. According to this view the Gospel of Mark arose earlier than the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and became one of the two main sources of the material in both the later Gospels; in fact, it was taken up almost completely by them—of Mark's 661 verses, all but 50 reappear in Matthew and Luke, with much re-wording and some rearrangement. The other main source of the First and Third Gospels was an extensive document of Jesus' sayings, from which the great discourse sections in Matt., chaps. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 23-25, and Luke, chaps. 6, 9-18, were derived. This document, formerly called the Logia, now called Q (*Quelle*, "source"), was differently used by the first and third evangelists, or was known to them in different forms. Besides these two main written sources, each evangelist had minor written or oral sources.

The particular form of the Markan hypothesis which Holdsworth proposes is a development of H. J. Holtzmann's Ur-Markus theory and A. Wright's theory of three editions of the Gospel of Mark. He advocates the view that Mark, as the interpreter into Greek of Peter's Aramaic preaching, was with Peter when he preached in Palestine, especially to Gentiles at Caesarea, and produced his first edition from Peter's preaching as there given about 42 A.D. When Peter went to Egypt between 50 and 60 A.D. and preached the Gospel to the Jews there, especially in Alexandria, Mark reproduced that preaching in a second edition of his book, which thereupon became the special Gospel of the Egyptian Christians. And finally, when Peter went to Rome about 60 A.D., his preaching of the Gospel to the Romans was also made into a book by Mark, *ca.* 65-70 A.D.; this third edition was the Gospel of Mark that found preservation in the New Testament canon—our present Mark. The first or Palestinian edition of Mark was used by Luke as his special Mark-source, obtained by him while he was with Paul during his Caesarean imprisonment, 58-60 A.D. The second or Egyptian edition of Mark was used by the author of the Gospel of Matthew, which work was produced in Egypt.

This interesting theory deserves consideration along with the other courageous attempts to explain the precise relation of the First and Third Gospels to the Second Gospel. Holdsworth maintains that the Gospel of Mark everywhere reveals traits which support the ancient church tradition that it was a transcript of Peter's preaching. The fuller content and the graphic features of the canonical Mark did not belong equally to the previous editions, but grew as Peter developed his message and the form of its presentation.

Holdsworth's view of Q, which according to the two-document hypothesis was the second main source of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, identifies it

with the Matthean Logia described by Papias. He thinks that the apostle Matthew, "in quite early days" (he seems to mean about 40 A.D.) collected the sayings of Jesus in Aramaic, which were then circulating in Palestine, rejecting the unguenuine and making a large, precious, written account of Jesus' teaching. He arranged the sayings topically in five sections, according to a customary literary method of the Jews. When the gospel spread outside of Palestine, among Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles, this Matthew-document was translated into Greek for evangelistic use. In Egypt (*ca.* 55-60 A.D.?) one of these Greek copies of Q was combined by a local Christian with the second or Egyptian edition of Mark, by opening the Markan narrative at five several points and inserting at each point one of the five discourse sections of Q, marking the junction by a special formula. These two main masses of memorabilia, together with smaller pieces (the infancy narrative and the messianic proof-texts), made up the first canonical Gospel. As for the Third Gospel, Luke also used a "Logian document" as a second main source after Mark (in the first or Palestinian edition). This second source, like his first, had Jewish features and was of Palestinian origin. It was a collection of Jesus' sayings, but Holdsworth thinks it was not to be identified with the apostle Matthew's Logia or Q. At this point, therefore, he breaks with the two-document hypothesis, as he does also in predicating a third main source for Luke (he calls it the "special source"), to which he assigns, among other things, the infancy chapters and the whole "Perean" section (in detail, Luke 1:1-2:52; 3:23-38; 4:14-30; 7:11-17, 29 f.; 7:36-8:3; 9:51-18:14; 19:1-27; 23:6-19, 27-31; 24:1-53).

President King, in *The Ethics of Jesus*, begins (chap. i) with a "Summary of the Entire Teaching of Jesus," based upon the Gospel of Luke. "Religious teaching, in the thought of Jesus, is always involved in what may seem to be the plainest ethical principles, because every duty which he recognizes is felt by him to be the will of God." Also, it is important to observe that "in the example of Jesus we have the best possible illustration of the translation of his principles into life, and we cannot wholly ignore the impression made by the spirit of his life in the interpretation of his teaching." This survey of the whole message of Jesus shows its permeation with the simplest principles of the ethical and religious life, and the recurrence of certain great emphases in the teaching. Especially to be noted are the vital concrete characterization of the Christian life, the requirement of truth and honesty in his disciples, the essential need of a genuine, self-giving love, the revolutionary character of Jesus' religion, and the absoluteness of his claim for himself and for his message.

King's next step (chap. ii) is to investigate the ethical element in Schmiedel's well-known "foundation-pillar" passages (Mark 3:21, 31-35; 6:5 f., 34; 8:12; 10:18; 13:32; 15:34; Matt. 7:29; 11:2-6, 28; 12:32; 16:5-12). Concurring in Schmiedel's judgment that these twelve extracts from the Gospels contain the *most certain historical facts* concerning Jesus, he regards them as "able to furnish a valuable criterion of the ethical teaching of Jesus." Ten aspects of this teaching are found here: (1) the earnestness of the life of Jesus, and the demands for

like earnestness in others; (2) absolute genuineness, integrity of life, truth to the inner light; (3) the inwardness of all true moral and spiritual life, and the insistence upon moral and spiritual independence; (4) the fundamental principles of reverence for the person; (5) the ethical conception of religion, and the religious conception of the ethical; (6) Jesus' sense of the contrast of his teaching with that of the other Jewish teachers; (7) his own deep and characteristic compassion, carrying with it a demand for a like spirit in others; (8) his sense of insight, conviction, message, calling; (9) his sense of unique relation to God and men, of possessing the message of life for men; (10) the resulting impression of authority.

In a similar way King summarizes the ethical content of Burkitt's thirty-one "doubly attested" sayings of Jesus (Mark 3:4, 22-26, 27, 28-30, 31-34; 4:3-9, 21, 22, 23, 24*b*, 25, 30-32; 6:4, 10 f.; 8:12*b*, 15, 34, 42; 9:43-48, 50; 10:11 f., 42-45; 11:22 f., 24, 25; 12:[32-34*a*], 38 f.; 13:11, 15 f., 21, 34 f.; and the parallel accounts of these sayings in Matthew and Luke). These teachings are of especial trustworthiness and importance because they appear in *both* of the two main *sources* of our Gospels, namely, in Mark and Q (the Logia document used jointly by the first and third evangelists to supply discourse material, along with Mark's narrative material, for their Lives of Christ). Burkitt's Q here is not identical with, but is similar to, Harnack's Q. The contents and characteristics of Q are of course hypothetical, and also its common use by Matthew and Luke. But sayings of Jesus which have been preserved in two or three apparently *independent* lines of transmission acquire thereby a special significance. These "doubly attested" sayings present an ethical teaching which agrees well with that of Schmiedel's "foundation-pillar" passages, and by the union of both we have "a secure foundation for the study of the ethics of Jesus." They set forth the fundamental moral-religious laws of human living: the necessary inwardness and independence of the moral life; the supremacy of love; the law of use, growth, and habit, of cause and effect in relation to others, of faith in the growth of the Kingdom, of sharing the good; the sin of causing others to stumble; the law of efficiency, of the contagion of the good, of the necessity of absolute integrity of life, of reverence for the person, of priority based on service, of utterance, and of vigilant watchfulness.

In chap. iii our author proceeds to consider the ethical teaching of Jesus as contained in the whole document Q (as reconstructed by Harnack in *The Sayings of Jesus*) and in the whole Gospel of Mark. Harnack makes Q consist of 201 verses, found jointly in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke; and the order of these Q sayings is better preserved in the former than in the latter. The Q passages which King treats, as containing the ethical teaching of Jesus, are: Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; (portions of the Sermon on the Mount, contained in Matt. 5:1-7:27, are treated by King in chaps. v-vii of his book); 8:19-22; 10:24-39; 11:16-19; 15:14; 18:12 f., 15, 21 f.; 21:32; (22:2-11); 23:4, 12 f., 23, 25-36 (25:14-30); and the parallel accounts in Luke. In these passages three thoughts are notably developed: the contrast with the Pharisaic spirit, the necessity of sympathetic and tender forgiveness, and the sense of the seriousness of life.



Turning to the Gospel of Mark, our author considers the following passages: 1:15, 17, 38; 2:17, 19-22, 25-28; 4:3-9, 11-20, 26-29; 7:6-15, 18-23; 8:35 f.; 9:37, 39-41, 49 f.; 10:2-9, 14 f., 23 ff., 27, 29 ff., 38 ff.; 12:15 ff., 29 ff., 34, 38-40, 43 f. Here again, and more fully, we find the chief teachings and emphases already observed in the "foundation-pillar" and the "doubly attested" sayings; also, the counterparts of the Q teachings. Summarizing the ethical teaching of Mark, we find "that Jesus' *message* involved the ethical faith in the moral trend of the universe; that his *method* is the contagion of the good life; that his *motive* is love and the sense of the need of men; that his *goal* is the establishment of the kingdom of love; that Jesus sees his teaching as plainly *contrasted* with that prevalent in his time with its trend toward externalism, traditionalism, and ceremonialism; and that he has such a sense of the necessity of a mental and spiritual inwardness and independence as makes him certain that none of the old forms are adequate to his new spirit; that Jesus discerns the basic nature of the *childlike qualities*, and states his own all-embracing principle of *love* in the great paradox and the great commandment; and applies this principle—that one is to do always and only what love enjoins—suggestively to the social problems of ambition, wealth, the child, marriage, and the state."

The ethical teaching in the passages peculiar to the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke respectively is discussed in chap. iv. The trends of teaching already seen recur here also; there is no lack of harmony in the message reported, no reason to question the general historical trustworthiness of even these *singly attested* sayings. There may be some passages, or some emphases, which come from the apostolic age rather than from Jesus, but these are in any case a minor feature of the Gospels, and do not prevent our recovery of the actual message of Jesus in all essential respects.

A brief treatment of "The Sermon on the Mount as a Whole" is given in chap. v; an extended and valuable interpretation of the Beatitudes as "Jesus' Conception of the Basic Qualities of Life" occupies chap. vi; and a consideration of the "Great Motives to Living, in the Sermon on the Mount" makes chap. vii the crowning division of President King's most helpful book. He rightly regards the Sermon on the Mount in Matt., chaps. 5-7, as "a kind of summary of all that is most significant and essential in Jesus' entire teaching," as containing "the great central conceptions of Jesus as to God, as to men, as to life." Jesus gave his teaching, not in the form of a technically constructed system of ethics, but as specific teachings for concrete situations; consequently his sayings come down to us in collections of miscellaneous sayings called out on various occasions. Nevertheless, Jesus' teaching has "a marvelously thoroughgoing unity," which springs from his faith in God as Father, his faith that love is at the heart of the world, and that the universe is on the side of the righteous will. We may then say that Jesus taught an ethical system, in the sense of unified and consistent thinking on life, its end, spirit, motives, and means, with marvelous practical incentive to living.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How were the sayings of Jesus remembered, used, and transmitted during the years 28-45 A.D.?
2. What modifications did the reported teaching of Jesus undergo by reason of its use for edification and for gentile evangelization during the years 45-70 A.D.?
3. What was the primary purpose of the authors of the first three Gospels?
4. What, in general, is the historical trustworthiness of the synoptic accounts of Jesus' teaching?
5. How can we distinguish the ethical from the religious teaching of Jesus?
6. What reasons are there for doing so?
7. How did Jesus fundamentally view human life?
8. What did he set forth as the essential ethical principles?
9. Was Jesus' message a systematic, theoretical exposition of ethical truth and duty, or a series of popular, practical, and concrete moral teachings publicly given on various occasions?
10. What kind of unity characterized the teaching of Jesus?

### Books for Further Reading

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| Harnack, <i>The Sayings of Jesus</i> .                          | Burkitt, <i>The Earliest Sources for the Life of Jesus</i> .  |
| Pullan, <i>The Gospels</i> .                                    | Stanton, <i>The Gospels as Historical Documents</i> , Vol II. |
| Sanday, et al., <i>Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem</i> . | Bacon, <i>The Beginnings of Gospel Story</i> .                |
| Burkitt, <i>The Gospel History and Its Transmission</i> .       | Menzies, <i>The Earliest Gospel</i> .                         |